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The New Conservative Offensive

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Ideological Convergences Across 'East' and 'West': The New Conservative Offensive

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Introduction[1]

The controversial 'clash of cultures' thesis elucidated by Samuel Huntington sees global ideological conflict waning, to be replaced by new disputes between 'the West' and 'the Rest'. In this view, tension shifts from the political to the cultural realm and takes on different dimensions. This thesis has attracted its share of criticism within the West as well as in Asia, but it has also complemented attempts by some Asian political leaders to insulate their regimes from charges of human rights abuses and to justify authoritarian rule. The notion that there is something culturally different or even mysterious about Asians has led many to argue that the West should get used to the idea that 'they' will never be like 'us' and that, in the words of Rawdon Dalrymple, former Australian Ambassador to Indonesia, 'Confucian-style authoritarianism' will prevail over liberal-democratic values, including human rights (as cited in *The Weekend Australian* 29-30 October 1994: 2). Yet even if this scenario were to unfold, the question is whether culture or a contest of power underlies it.

The East-West dichotomy of the 'clash of cultures' thesis has assisted Asian political leaders to posit a general Asian cultural aversion to some 'Western' concepts. With the global economic centre of gravity apparently shifting toward Asia, these leaders exhibit a stridency both in their rejection of criticism, from both internal and external sources, and in the delineation of supposed fundamental Asian cultural values. What are depicted as 'Western values' are especially challenging now because local opposition groups (no longer simply labelled and rejected as 'communists') are calling for 'human rights', extended democratic rights and the like. By labelling these calls as 'alien', domestic challenges are blunted or made seem less than legitimate. The alternative 'Asian' set of values is constructed with this in mind.

What is particularly interesting in this is that the account provided by a select group of authoritarian political and community leaders is not without its adherents in the West. This fact carries with it significant foreign policy and domestic political implications, and is especially important for the attempt by policy makers in countries outside Asia attempting to effect more extensive ties with countries in this region.

The central argument in this paper is that the notion of a clash of cultures is grossly misplaced. Rather, the more interesting and profound development embodied in the changing

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position of Asia in the global political economy, and the attendant assertion of 'Asian-ness', is the apparent convergence of political ideologies; a fact that is obscured by the proclaimed cultural dichotomy. Indeed, with nearly every attempt by self-proclaimed Asian leaders to specify a set of 'Asian' cultural values distinct from those of the West, it becomes clearer that it is principally conservative political philosophy that they are championing. Their criticisms of Western society are invariably ethnocentric and stereotyped attacks on liberalism and, in many respects, mirror long-standing critiques of liberalism by Western conservatives.

This is not to suggest such positions are simply derived from earlier Western thought, nor to contend that the broader political and ideological positions of different authoritarian leaders in Asia can simply be understood in these terms. But this recourse to conservative rhetoric by certain leaders reflects a long-standing concern, combined with a recognition of the changing political challenges confronting them. The ideology of many anti-colonial movements and some of the first post-colonial governments drew heavily on anti-liberalism sentiment. The Asian socialist movement, strong in the South Asian countries, Burma, Malaya and Singapore, was built on anti-communism *and* anti-liberalism (see Josey 1957). For example, once a self-styled socialist, Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew was an outspoken critic of both ideologies, but was not yet the critic of the West he was later to become. Within this movement, strong anti-liberal sentiments have remained an element of anti-colonialism and the nation-building effort after the communist threat had been expunged.

Today, having presided over major social, economic and political transformations, it is now the preservation of the order they have established which is perceived as the task at hand. It is suggested in this paper that one of the consequences of this is that the preconditions for new political alliances spanning 'East' and 'West' are emerging and are potentially more significant than the forecast clash of cultures. As I will attempts to demonstrate, opponents of liberalism and social democracy, both inside and outside 'Asia', are drawing on each others' arguments and views with a growing synergy.[2] The particular material below draws heavily but not exclusively on the way this process has involved Australia. However, this experience has wider implications since the chord the so-called 'Asian' values strike with elements in Australian society - and the domestic political utility of depicting such values as instrumental in rapid economic growth in Asia - is not unique.

It should be noted that, in attempting to advance the above-stated thesis, this paper concentrates on the resonances between conservatism across 'East' and 'West'. It does not

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[2] Of course, even the notion of 'Asia' as a cultural or even political entity is a fiction.

attempt to delve into the serious divisions *within* the 'East' over the positions enunciated by the self-appointed articulators and custodians of 'Eastern' values. There are, however, significant challenges of this sort which further expose as inadequate and superficial the East-West cultural divide (see Kim Dae Jung 1994; Loh 1993; Lung 1994; Aung 1994; Shenon 1995; Kohut 1995; Wain 1994; *Far Eastern Economic Review [FEER]* 10 December 1992).[3] The idea that democratic values can only work in, or originate from, 'the West' is understandable viewed by many Asians as self-serving and patronising.

The 'Clash of Cultures'

According to the conservative American political scientist Samuel Huntington (1993: 22), world politics is entering a new phase in which the fundamental source of conflict will be cultural rather than ideological or economic. The end of the Cold War has coincided with the increased economic and military power of non-Western civilisations who 'no longer remain objects of history as targets of Western colonialism but join the West as movers and shapers of history' (Huntington 1993: 23). Huntington expects that there will be increasingly active contestation over, and resistance to, Western cultural dominance and a heightening of inter-cultural friction around the globe. This friction, argues Huntington (1993: 25), derives from the fact that people of:

> different civilizations have different views on the relations between God and man, the individual and the group, the citizen and the state, parents and children, husband and wife, as well as differing views of the relative importance of rights and responsibilities, liberty and authority, equality and hierarchy. These differences are the product of centuries. They will not soon disappear.

The consequence of this will be clashes at the local level, where territorial struggles take place between 'adjacent groups along the fault lines between civilizations' (Huntington 1993: 29), and at the macro-level where states belonging to differing civilisations compete for military and economic power, and over the 'control of international institutions and third parties, and competitively promote their particular political and religious values' (Huntington 1993: 29).

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[3] On this point, it is important to note that the Forum of Democratic Leaders in the Asia-Pacific held in Seoul 1-2 December 1994 organised by Kim Dae Jung and Corizon Aquino attracted over 250 participants.

Although Huntington believes that global political dynamics will be increasingly shaped by interactions between seven or eight major civilisations, he essentially sees the division between the 'West and the Rest' as the major source of conflict, where he sees a stark cultural divide:

> Western concepts differ fundamentally from those prevalent in other civilizations. Western ideas of individualism, liberalism, constitutionalism, human rights, equality, liberty, the rule of law, democracy, free markets, the separation of church and state, often have little resonance in Islamic, Confucian, Japanese, Hindu, Buddhist or Orthodox cultures (Huntington 1993: 40).

Moreover, Huntington (1993: 40-41) draws attention to elements of liberal thought, and proceeds to underline a 'de-Westernization and indigenization of elites' in the non-Western world that portends a preparedness to confront these differences with a confidence and self-assuredness that has not existed in the past. To be sure, serious conflict will continue between states and groups within the same civilisations, but they will not be of the same intensity as inter-civilisation conflict in general or 'West versus the Rest' conflict in particular.

Huntington (1993:27) also makes observations about regional economic co-operation which have implications for the aspirations of Australian policy makers. Economic regionalism, he argues, stands the best chance of success when it is 'rooted in a common civilization'. For this reason, he sees difficulty in a broad East Asian grouping rivalling the achievements of the European Community. Japan is so different culturally from its neighbours, argues Huntington, that it is the rapid extension of economic relations between China and countries with substantial overseas Chinese communities - particularly Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore - that is likely to shape the primary economic bloc unfolding in the region.[4] On this basis, Huntington points approvingly to Owen Harries' reservations about Prime Minister Paul Keating's notion of Australia as an 'Asian country'. Harries (1993: 19) cautions against Australia creating an historic first as a 'reverse torn country': 'a fully Western country in which a significant section of the elite now advocates a move to membership of another, non-Western civilisation'.[5]

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[4] Muzaffar, for example, has observed that ASEAN is a regional grouping encompassing four civilisations that has operated quite effectively, in spite of cultural differences between member states (O'Hagen 1994: 9).

[5] Harries points out that a 'torn country' normally involves attempts by non-Western countries to attach themselves to Western civilisation.

Whilst Huntington predicts a shift towards conflict of a more fundamental nature, it does not logically follow that global politics is headed for intractable difficulties, but it is clear that only the West's resignation to a declining ability to have its essentially liberal values and its interests institutionalised as universally valid will serious conflict be avoided. It is incumbent on the West to 'develop a more profound understanding of the basic religious and philosophical assumptions underlying other civilizations and the ways in which people in those civilizations see their interests' (Huntington 1993: 49). For the first time, it is argued the West faces the challenge of cultural coexistence, and Huntington stresses the need for the West to maintain the economic and military strength appropriate to the defence of its interests.

A comprehensive critical discussion of Huntington's notion of a 'clash of cultures' is not the purpose of this essay.[6] Rather, the focus is on the claim that it is culture, as distinct from ideology, which underlies recent friction between the so-called East and West over such issues as human rights, labour standards and law and order policies, and portends further 'clashes'. It is the case that important global shifts in economic and political power favour heightened contestation over these and other issues. Frequent and forceful assertions about 'Asian-ness' from various Southeast Asian leaders reflect a recognition of this changing balance. There is also a discernible measure of concern in some circles in the West about its relative economic decline, although Mahbubani's (1993: 10) recent reference to a developing 'siege mentality' is overstating the case.[7]

However, the understanding in this paper is that such friction is not the manifestation of cultural differences assuming centre stage in world history at the expense of political and ideological struggle. On the contrary, cultural arguments are being harnessed to ideological and political ends - an exercise to which Huntington's thesis lends some intellectual credibility precisely because he operates largely within the same ideological perspective as those who are taking up the cultural cudgels with such alacrity - conservatism. I will attempt to show how protestations about distinctive Asian culture often mask this more universal political philosophy.[8]

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[6] For discussions and critiques of Huntington's thesis, see O'Hagen 1994 and *Foreign Affairs* 72(4), 1993 and *Asian Studies Review*, 18(1), 1994 which contains various responses.

[7] The Singaporean Minister of Information and the Arts and Second Minister of Foreign Affairs, George Yeo (1993), drew attention to what he saw as anti-Asian sentiments rising in the West in response to the emerging economic might of Asia.

[8] This paper does not propose to test the accuracy of the historical and social observations made by some Asian leaders. Another paper is required to debunk the myths they purvey.

The 'Clash' and its Harmonies

Ironically, whilst Huntington's thesis has merit in its provocative attempt to capture the dynamics of momentous historical change, it ultimately rests on a rather ahistorical conception of culture. As O'Hagen (1994: 18) notes, although Huntington defines civilisations as dynamic entities, his depiction of them is largely as immutable belief systems. Cultures are thus on an unwavering trajectory of distinctiveness. The utility of this understanding to the custodians of authoritarian rule is obvious: deep-seated cultural traditions cannot be expected to change overnight, even if that were considered desirable. The effect of this is to divert attention from the dynamics of social, political and economic life. Yet it is precisely the tremendous change internal to Asian societies that has precipitated both the broader shifts in global economic and political power and the concern shown by some Asian elites with 'traditional Asian values'.

The dramatic social transformations which accompany economic development in Asian countries have not only ushered in new centres of economic and political power, but also new divisions and conflicts. Questions of wealth distribution, environmentalism and the position of women are surfacing, for example. None of these appear to have much to do with the current interest of some Asian leaders in what they portray as distinctively 'Asian' values. However, issues such as these have much to do with internal challenges - both real and perceived - to existing regimes. In defining 'Asian values', these leaders present themselves as the true bearers of Asian traditions, enabling them to brand dissenting views as 'unAsian' and alien. And this is the clear intention of those Asian leaders who dismiss domestic and regional agitation over issues such as human rights.

Equally, the tendency to depict the West as some sort of cultural monolith plays down significant disputations over liberalism, including the conservative backlash in recent decades. Certainly there are important points of intersection that bring various liberals and conservatives together. In particular, a market system not only rewards economic individualism and potentially expands the political space outside the state, both attractive to liberals, but it imposes a discipline on individuals and generates an hierarchical order of winners and losers that appeals to conservatives. Understandably, then, both conservatives and liberals share a deep scepticism about independent trade union power which is perceived as a threat to the prerogatives of capital and order more generally. Nevertheless, friction between these camps is not only real, but a central dynamic in the politics of most contemporary liberal democratic societies. The liberals' more optimistic view of human nature and associated emphasis on individualism, their relative lack of reverence for tradition in favour of reason and rationality,

and their greater tolerance of the incursions of the market economy on social life have, over time, manifested in a range of unresolved disputes with conservatives. The contemporary conservative backlash against a host of liberal social and economic reforms underlines the thematic dilemma of trying to strike a balance between the respective rights and obligations of the individual vis-a-vis the state that would accommodate both conservative and liberal views. Even within liberalism there are significant tensions of this sort, notably between the advocates of a more laissez-faire economic individualism, popularly referred to as neo-liberals or 'dries', and the 'wets' who sanction a more interventionist social and economic role for the state. The former's conception of liberty is an acutely class-specific one which privileges and champions the liberties of those enterprising individuals with capital.

Huntington himself contributes to an idealisation of his own 'culture' by minimising this. In a recent interview he asserted that 'one should not underestimate the central strength of American society which is individualism and the emphasis on competition and mobility, people going out and doing things for themselves and not relying upon government' (Huntington, quoted in *Asiaweek* 6 April 1994: 36). This is arguably an ideological account in so much as these are 'strengths' for some groups but weaknesses for others in American society. In their attempts to keep the East-West cultural dichotomy alive, various Asian political leaders happily adopt this simplistic caricature of the West as unproblematically liberal.

'Clash of culture' arguments are seductive, not only for those in the 'East' who wish to oppose dissent, but also to various elements within the 'West' who wish to promote conservative domestic political agendas. Neo-liberals, seeking a greater assertion of market relations at the expense of the state, find the content of some so-called Asian values useful in advancing, for example, the case for labour market deregulation and reduced state welfare spending. Lee Kuan Yew's gratuitous advice to Australians in 1994 was music to the ears of both neo-liberals and conservatives: 'to compete in the same race with Asians, Australians must be weaned from a dependency on public welfare and become more self-reliant and competitive'. He elaborated: 'Deep-seated problems of work ethic, productivity, enterprise, bloody-minded unions protecting unproductive work practices, feather-bedding and inflexibility in wages are neither quickly nor easily cured' (quoted in *The Australian* 19 April 1994: 1).[9]

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[9] One of the rebuffs to this view came from a senior Hong Kong bureaucrat who happened to be in Australia at the time. Michael Sze, Hong Kong's civil service secretary and former director of foreign trade described Lee's view as outdated. Sze said he was 'most impressed with Australia's service sector and the massive reforms in the public service' (as quoted in *The West Australian* 27 April 1994: 4).

These comments tap the intersection of liberalism and conservatism in opposing common 'enemies'.

The discussion below concentrates on the correspondence between 'Asian values' and the philosophies and agendas of conservatives in the West who seek the restoration of what they identify as traditional values in their own societies. I will pursue this under the following headings, each of which represents a central and universal characteristic of conservatism: stability ahead of rapid change; human nature and discipline; order and authority; traditional values; obligations ahead of rights. In taking this approach, it is not suggested that the entire perspective of the selected leaders espousing 'Asian values' can be understood solely in terms of conservative theory and philosophy. Nor is it suggested that all of the Australian conservatives mentioned are friends of Asia or Asians. There are few political actors anywhere who do not fuse different, and often contradictory, ideological elements. I will concentrate on those 'values' which unite them ideologically. Major strands of conservative thought are present in the so-called 'Asian values' these leaders express and this suggests important convergences in political agendas common within and across the alleged East-West conceptual divide.

The survey of ideas by Asian leaders is necessarily limited rather than comprehensive, and draws heavily on statements by the activist Singaporean leaders. Singaporeans have certainly played a disproportionately large role in declarations about 'Asian values', especially in the international arena (see George 1994). But if the self-appointed role as regional custodian and articulator of 'Asian values' has irritated neighbouring authoritarian leaders at times, it has less to do with the content of the proclamations than the diplomacy involved. Rather, similar claims to a culturally distinctive 'Asian-ness' are to be found amongst leaders from Indonesia, Malaysia and China in particular.

Conservative Values

Stability Ahead of Rapid Change

The conservative's primary attachment is with the past, an attachment grounded in the notion that those values, beliefs and institutions which have survived and evolved over time must have done so because of their inherent worth. Even so, conservatives have not been opposed to all change, endorsing change where it is seen as functional for the preservation of the traditional values and the hierarchical social order for which they stand (Kirk 1978). Change is appropriate where it is drawn from the well of tradition, and conservatives emphasise

continuity ahead of change, for too much of the latter violates tradition. Hence, Edmund Burke's fear of revolutionary change which he argued as 'having no charm but for robbers and assassins, and no natural origin but in the brains of fools or madmen' (quoted in O'Sullivan 1976: 84). However, if traditional values are reproduced and change grows from them, then change is acceptable (O'Gorman 1986: 2; O'Sullivan 1976; Viereck 1962, 1978).

Since most Asian societies have undergone dramatic change in recent decades, it would seem that this conservative predisposition has little relevance to the outlooks of contemporary Asian leaders. After all, people like Soeharto, Lee Kuan Yew, Mahathir and their cohorts have seen remarkable changes - doing much to transform non-capitalist structures. In their earlier years, in particular, their rhetoric was replete with statements asserting the primacy of change at virtually every level of society. Much of this change was meant to strengthen society and state against challenges from the Left.

Yet the wheel has turned. So successful have their respective projects been, including the destruction of much of the Left (see Hewison & Rodan 1994), that the pace and extent of social change now threatens to loosen the grip of these leaderships over social and political life. The aspirations for change are now far more qualified, with a preference for Western technology and 'Asian' values. Like their conservative counterparts in the West, these leaders believe that the preservation of traditional values is the only way to maintain social order amidst the dynamism of economic change, and fear the consequences if they do not prevail. Huntington (1968) made a similar point, albeit in the theoretical garb of revisionist modernisation theory, some 20 years ago.

In his 1994 National Day speech, Singapore Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong acknowledged that change in Singapore was unavoidable, but contrasts change in his country with that in Britain and the United States. In Singapore, change was said to be 'evolutionary, not revolutionary', and he added: 'We do not have to make fundamental changes in direction because our political and economic institutions, and our public policies, are right' (quoted in *The Straits Times Weekly Edition* [*STWE*] 3 Sept. 1994: 24). In the same speech Goh was in no doubt about what, above all else, must be preserved:

> Our institutions and basic policies are in place to sustain high economic growth. But if we lose our traditional values, our family strengths and our social cohesion, we will lose our vibrancy and decline. This is the intangible factor in the success of the East Asian economies (quoted in *STWE* 3 Sept. 1994: 24).

Whether or not this is the intangible factor, it should be clear that this is a strong call for the retention of the status quo.

The emphasis on traditional values amidst flux and dynamism will be discussed below, but the significance to conservatives of this sort of argument was highlighted by Australian conservative B.A. Santamaria, whose regular column for *The Australian* was given over to what he described as the wisdom of former Singaporean Ambassador to Washington, Tommy Koh. In reproducing Koh's *International Herald Tribune* article, entitled 'The 10 Values that Undergird East Asian Strength and Success', Santamaria urged that Australians seriously consider such values (*The Australian* 1-2 January 1994: 14).

Human Nature and the Need for Discipline

Conservatives have a fundamentally negative view of human nature, seeing humans as imperfect and requiring control (O'Sullivan 1976: 14-5). Whereas Rousseau saw humans as inherently free and good, conservatives understand humans as naturally evil and prone to anarchy and destruction. Hence, conservative writer Russell Kirk (1978: 8) underlines how 'The force of tradition acts as a check on the anarchic impulses of human beings'. The imperfect nature of humans necessitates controls, and Peter Viereck (1978: 32) writes about 'self-expression through self-restraint'.

The theme of discipline is also strong in the attempts by Asian leaders to differentiate so-called Asian values from those of Western societies. In an ironic statement from the former Prime Minister of possibly the world's most socially-engineered society, Lee Kuan Yew stated in an interview with the editor of the American *Foreign Affairs* that:

> There is such a thing called evil, and it is not the result of being a victim of society. You are just an evil man, prone to do evil things, and you have to be stopped from doing them. Westerners have abandoned an ethical basis for society, believing all problems are solvable by good government, which we in the East never believed possible (quoted in Zakaria 1994: 112).

Kishore Mahbubani (1994: 9), permanent secretary in Singapore's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, links 'East Asian discipline' with economic performance, stating 'the evidence is accumulating that socially cohesive and disciplined societies are developing a competitive edge in today's world'. Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir has also recently talked about the importance for Malaysia of a 'culture of self-discipline and responsibility towards society' (quoted in *STWE* 3 Sept 1994: 10).

In Goh's 1994 National Day speech, he extended this theme, decrying what he regards as the light treatment meted out to criminals in the US and Britain. Echoing the criticisms of conservatives in these countries, he contended that some judges there show more sympathy for the offender than the victim. His intention was to hammer home the point that Singapore's authorities would continue to impose discipline and not shy from this responsibility. The alternative was social chaos and breakdown, as was now manifesting in the West.

This was a timely observation given that Singapore and the United States officials had, in previous months, been exchanging views over the sentence of an American teenager living in Singapore, Michael Fay, who had been convicted by a Singapore court on charges of vandalism. Sentenced to four months jail, a S$2,200 fine and six strokes of the cane, Fay ultimately had his caning reduced to four strokes as a limited gesture to the American government which had actually appealed for a more generous clemency to avoid caning altogether. President Clinton had referred to the punishment as 'excessive' and charges of barbarism were invariably levelled by human rights spokespersons and individual commentators in the United States and elsewhere. In the United States, a *Christian Science Monitor* editorial maintained, 'It is not going too far to say that the caning of Fay is almost a literal expression of what Samuel Huntington has called an "emerging clash of civilizations"'(quoted in *STWE* 23 April 1994: 13). Lee Kuan Yew took the opportunity to claim the Fay affair evidenced America's moral decay: 'The [US] dares not restrain or punish individuals, forgiving them for whatever they have done. That's why the whole country is in chaos: drugs, violence, unemployment and homelessness' (quoted in *Asiaweek* 25 May 1994: 38).

However, the reaction within the West to incidents such as the Fay caning actually demonstrates that the Singapore government's preference for a tough stance on law and order is by no means culturally-based. Rather, in large numbers, like-minded conservatives in the West with the same basic mistrust of human nature were amongst the strongest supporters of the Singapore government's stances (*STWE* 23 April 1994: 13; Lal 1994). Such attitudes are familiar to any reader of almost any popular Australian (or US or British) newspaper, often flying in the face of crime statistics which do not indicate massive crime waves. Severe discipline is seen as a force for order. In Australia, Queensland National Party Member of Parliament, Vince Lester, not only applauded the Singapore system but called for the adoption of flogging in Australia. Other sections of the Queensland National Party echoed this view and the Young Nationals went so far as to advocate flogging for minor crimes such as evasion of taxi or bus fares (*The Courier Mail* 5 July 1994: 3).

Amidst the Fay controversy, Western Australian Premier Richard Court visited Singapore in February and on his return publicly embraced the re-introduction of the death penalty in his state (*The West Australian* 18 March 1994: 9). He spoke admiringly about the achievements of Singapore's authorities: 'They have entrenched a highly disciplined approach to law and order issues where everyone clearly knows the ground rules'. He continued to remark 'there is no doubt that the discipline at a younger age has helped instil a strong sense of responsibility and pride in their country' (quoted in *The West Australian* 18 March 1994: 9). His Attorney-General, Cheryl Edwardes, also visited a Singapore Reformation Working Centre in her search for a model for discipline-oriented work camps for young offenders (*The Sunday Times* [Perth] 31 July 1994: 23). Clearly the punitive and disciplinarian approach to law and order in Singapore evokes significant support and respect in the West, with key public figures believing at least some elements worthy of recommendation. Interestingly, even Singaporeans are beginning to feel the criticism of this kind of approach from other Asian commentators, including from those who feel that crime is not a reflection of the inherent evil of people (see Tan Sai Siong 1994).

Order and Authority

The conservative emphasis on historical continuity ahead of abrupt social change and upheavals is linked to a conception of society as an organic whole. Society is seen as a natural, organic product of slow historical growth and it is tradition, morality and the force of habit that hold society together. It is enormously complex: embodying far more than the sum of its parts or the mass of its relationships. This living organism constantly renews itself. The importance of order is paramount in this view, and what is functional for order is morally defensible. Given the organic model, conservatives understandably view conflict as dysfunctional and threatening to unity and stability. According to Burke, the customary, unthinking parts of life form a major part of social existence and the life of this organism (see O'Gorman 1973: 114-7). Here the centrality of shared values in the maintenance and reproduction of order was underlined. The role of these values in underscoring social order cannot be over-emphasised.

The primacy of order marks conservatives off from liberals who champion individual freedom and socialists and social democrats who are inspired by notions of social justice. Conservatives believe that without order and stability there can be no liberty or civilisation. Lee Kuan Yew's observations on contemporary American social life reflect this view:

> I find parts of it totally unacceptable: guns, drugs, violent crime, vagrancy, unbecoming behaviour in public - in sum the breakdown of civil society. The

> expansion of the right of the individual to behave or misbehave as he pleases has come at the expense of orderly society. In the East the main object is to have a well-ordered society so that everybody can have maximum enjoyment of his freedoms. This can only exist in an ordered state and not in a natural state of contention and anarchy (quoted in Zakaria 1994: 111).

This quote was also reproduced approvingly by Australian conservative columnist B.A. Santamaria, in an article entitled 'US decadence in a festering time' (*The Weekend Australian* 23-24 April 1994: 24).

Given their negative view of human nature, it is no wonder conservatives should place great store in order and fear imminent disaster in the event that it should break down.
This theme emerges in Mahbubani's (1994: 11) complementary reservations about the direction of American society. He argues that:

> American society, by permitting all forms of lifestyle to emerge - without any social pressures to conform to certain standards - may have wrecked the moral and social fabric that is needed to keep a society calm and well ordered. A well-ordered society needs to plant clear constraints on behaviour in the minds of its citizens. In the United States it is clear that many such fundamental psychological constraints have collapsed, with the acceptance of all forms of lifestyle as legitimate.

Here Mahbubani is not only expressing concern about the collapse of order, but attributing it to the absence of a clear and unambiguous moral stance in defence of a particular order. Despite the general reverence for order by its advocates, it is not a case of any order will do. Rather, an hierarchical order with clear lines of dominance and subordination and undisputed authority is mutually attractive to Western conservatives and self-proclaimed champions of the 'Asian way'. Thus, conservatives have historically looked to the institutions of family, church and nation rather than representative political institutions.

Interestingly, Malaysian Deputy Prime Minister, Anwar Ibrahim, whose active promotion of an 'Asian renaissance' has included some notion of 'political liberality' and a rejection of the idea that this is inimical to economic development in Asia, is also strongly wedded to the primacy of order: 'In facing the manifold challenges to civil society, we must remain focused on its basic needs. Foremost of these is the creation and preservation of social order, without which there would be chaos' (Anwar 1994: 34). Significantly, Anwar's greater declared

tolerance of dissent is related to his view that 'Properly instituted, democracy will ensure order and stability' (Anwar 1994: 34).

Traditional Values

Both in the emphasis on traditional values and in the supposed content of 'Asian values', we again see a strong resonance with conservatism, where one of the major philosophical elements is the opposition to the idea of radical change and a preference for *conservation* of values and traditions considered essential to society (O'Sullivan 1976: 9; Viereck 1962: 36). For others, there is a desire to conserve particular social and political institutions (O'Gorman 1986: 2). Whilst the discipline of market relations is attractive to conservatives, they have always had reservations about capitalism, insisting that there be a moral basis to the social and political order which transcends mere market logic. Irving Kristol's *Two Cheers for Capitalism* (1978) is but the most striking contemporary reminder of this. As is observable in Australia and other advanced industrialised countries, this creates some tensions on the right of politics, distinguishing conservatives from liberals. Issues such as sexuality and civil liberties separate conservatives and liberals.

Asian conservatives have also stressed the importance of non-economic factors and the centrality of traditional Asian values. Singapore's Prime Minister Goh argues that a sense of community and nationhood, a disciplined and hardworking people, strong moral values, and family ties are the critical Asian values: 'These values are tried and tested, have held us together, propelled us forward. We must keep them as the bedrock of our society for the next century'. He continued: 'It is not simply materialism and pursuit of individual rewards which drive Singapore forward, but more important is the sense of idealism and service, born out of a feeling of social solidarity and national identification' (quoted in *STWE* 27 Aug 1994: 1). This call for an emphasis on Asian values is based on a fear that they 'are giving way to a more Westernised, individualistic, and self-centred outlook on life' (quoted in*Shared Values* 1991: 1).

As is so often the case with Western conservative critiques of their own societies, Goh emphasises the centrality of traditional family structures and values. When conservatives extol the virtues of the family, it is the patriarchal family they have in mind (see Stavropoulous 1990; Chipman 1986). This institution has a number of attractions for them. First, it embodies a clear power structure which is hierarchical and based on authority. The sexual division of labour and relations between parents and children are not based on egalitarian principles but tradition and the utility of those relations to order - both within the family and the society more generally. Second, it is a pivotal institution for socialisation - hence the common notion

that the family is the building block of society (Nisbet 1986: 37; Heywood 1992: 62-63).[10] In particular, it engenders a sense of obligation and commitment to a broader community. This is one reason conservatives are often hostile to state-provided social welfare - it undermines the authority of family and community (Nisbet 1986: 58-9; Scruton 1991: 21). Lee Kuan Yew is certainly in agreement with this, although he seems to claim it as a distinctively Asian view:

> Eastern societies believe that the individual exists in the context of his family. He is not pristine and separate. The family is part of the extended family, and then friends and the wider society. The ruler or the government does not try to provide for a person what the family best provides (quoted in Zakaria 1994: 113).

Such views of the family allow for attacks on supposedly negative trends in society, pointing to the erosion of parental authority and discipline over children and the lack of respect for elders. Such statements are as common in the West as they are in the East, with Goh recently expressing concern that divorce rates are rising in Singapore and that there are indeed some single parents and juvenile delinquency in the island state (*The Australian* 12 September 1994: 12). This perspective resulted in a recent policy announcement that unmarried mothers would be barred from buying homes from the Housing Development Board (HDB), rectifying a loophole which had seen 1,000 unmarried mothers purchase HDB homes (*The Australian* 23 August 1994: 10).[11] Goh also reaffirmed government policy not to allow women civil servants the same medical benefits as men, on the basis that it was the government's underlying philosophy to 'channel rights, benefits and privileges through the head of the family so that he can enforce the obligations and responsibilities of family members' (quoted in *The Australian* 23 August 1994: 10).

The Singapore government has also established a Family Values Promotion Committee involving people from the public and private sectors, which has identified five family values to uphold: love; care and concern; mutual respect; filial responsibility; commitment and communication in their roles as parents, spouses, sons and daughters (*STWE* 23 July 1994: 5; 20 August 1994: 6). Consistent with this, the government has supported the Maintenance

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[10] The family as the basic building block of society is one of the four identified in the *Shared Values* document produced by the Singapore Government in 1991.

[11] This policy was later expanded to include the fathers of 'illegitimate' children, if the mother was prepared to identify the father. The president of Singapore's Association of Women for Action and Research pointed out, there has been no increase in the number of unmarried mothers in the last five years (*STWE* 3 Sept 1994: 2).

of Parents Bill, which will legally enforce financial support for parents in old age (*STWE* 30 July 1994: 24),[12] and has pressed for a new clause in the Advertising Standards Authority of Singapore's code stating that advertisers should consider society's mores as well as the five core family values (*The Straits Times* [*ST*]13 Sept).

Goh's concerns were echoed and extended by Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir in his claim that the Western concept of a family is a clear indication of its moral decline. He condemned the West for recognition of a gay or lesbian couple as a family if it adopted children, and for recognition of de facto relationships as family units. 'It will only produce illegitimate children who may, in turn, have incestuous marriages with their siblings' (*The West Australian* 16 August 1994: 20).[13]

There is much support for these family values. Goh declared that he had even received positive feedback from housewives in the United Kingdom (*STWE* 10 September 1994: 1). Coincidentally, at about the same time, the Governor of Western Australia, Major General Michael Jeffrey, delivered a speech in Perth which expressed similar concerns about divorce rates and the growth of single-parent families. Governor Jeffrey claimed that a 'British study found a direct statistical link between single parenthood and virtually every major type of crime' (quoted in *The West Australian* 19 August 1994: 31). Like many conservatives before him, he was expressing a clear preference for the traditional family structure which he saw as 'in some trouble' (Jeffrey 1994: 4).[14] Hence, the Australian Broadcasting Commission's televising of Sydney's Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras in 1994 brought a variety of group and individual protests, calling for the promotion of the 'traditional' family, while the Lyons Forum, a group within the Federal Liberal Party, maintained that only traditional families bonded by 'God-ordained' principles could bring up children properly (*The Canberra Times* 4 March 1994: 1).

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[12] Seven PAP MPs voted against it. It has aroused considerable protest. Like most other Asian societies, Singapore is facing the problem of providing for an ageing population (*Asiaweek* 17 August 1994: 19-22). In its case, is determined to avoid the state welfare route.

[13] Goh's aggressive promotion of what 'family values' has prompted strong local reaction, most particularly from a women's group, the Association of Women for Action and Research (AWARE). Local writer Mary Lee's comment at a public forum possibly encapsulated the views of many of the disaffected when she contended that the government's Asian values paradigm 'seems to be the basis of its anti-women policies' (as quoted in *Asiaweek* 21 Sept 1994: 25). NMP Kanwaljit Soin also protested that Goh's speech was unfair to women and interpreted it as an apparent hardening of the government's position on the roles of men and women (*STWE* 10 Sept 1994: 1).

[14] Australian Bureau of Statistics data show that nine out of ten Australian families still live in a 'conventional' family setting. See *The Australian* 7 December 1993: 1.

It should be understood that recourse to 'traditionalism' is not the exclusive justification for the contemporary social and political order by certain leaders in Asia, but an increasingly important one. One of the interesting features of the ideological legitimation of this order in Singapore in particular is the emphasis on 'meritocracy'. In other words, elites occupy privileged positions owing to their technical and functional utility.

Obligations Ahead of Rights

As I have discussed, according to conservatives, human nature is such that we should be very cautious about individual freedom. Social institutions such as the family, army and organised religion that suppress individual drives and aspirations thus play a critical role in generating order and continuity and are valued accordingly. But the importance attached to order and the overall interest of 'society' as a living entity also logically leads conservatives to attribute moral superiority to the 'community' over the 'individual'. Hence, it is obligations to community, society, nation, family and other established social institutions that conservatives stress, over the rights of individuals. As British conservative writer Roger Scruton (1984: 16) puts it:

> In politics, the conservative attitude seeks above all for government, and regards no citizen as possessed of a natural right that transcends his obligation to be ruled. Even democracy - which corresponds neither to the natural nor the supernatural yearnings of the normal citizen - can be discarded without detriment to the civil well-being as the conservative conceives it.

When individuals assert political, social or economic rights, conservatives view these as having no basis in history nor proven utility to society. This is another reason for the conservative antagonism to social welfare, which tends to institutionalise dubious 'rights'. Conservatives despise the so-called 'new class'; for its part in fostering such claims (Kristol 1978). It is Goh's fear of this that underscores his recent attack on welfare as 'misguided compassion' which 'has led to disastrous results' (*The Australian* 12 September 1994: 12)

The conservative understanding of inequality as natural also contributes to a mistrust of, and hostility to, democracy and calls for equality and rights. Such notions are wrong and dangerous, and pose a threat to order and stability. People do have differential abilities and capacities, not the least in the area of political leadership, and the real task is to ensure that the gifted are ensured their rightful place for the overall good of society. Inequality is thus both natural and functional and it is folly to attempt to disturb this truth. Obviously this reasoning provides a perfect rationale for hierarchical structures and elitist ideologies. Lee

Kuan Yew has, of course, never been in any doubt about this in the construction of Singapore's 'meritocracy' (George 1973; Minchin 1990).

When we turn to the efforts by various Asian leaders to specify distinctive Asian cultural values, none is more thematic or important than the insistence on society or community ahead of the individual. Articulations of this difference are heavily weighted towards explicit attacks on 'Western liberalism': individualism and liberal democracy. What becomes clear is the depth of anti-liberalism rather than any detailed self-awareness of traditional Asian values. It is this position which forms the basis of a spirited rejection of human rights as either an alien or culturally-loaded concept from the West as well as the more general defence of authoritarian rule.

The dispute between the American and Singapore governments over the Fay sentence was contested around notions of human rights. Leading Singaporean business figure Ho Kwon Ping added weight to the notion of a 'clash of civilisations' by portraying it in terms of contrasting attitudes in East and West over the rights of individuals versus those of the community. In an address to lawyers on the day Fay was caned, he observed:

> The Western cliché that it would be better for a guilty person to go free than to convict an innocent person is testimony to the importance of the individual. But an Asian perspective may well be that it is better that an innocent person be convicted if the common welfare is protected than for a guilty person to be free to inflict further harm on the community (quoted in *Asiaweek* 25 May 1994: 38).

The common depiction of the West as characterised by rampant individualism - and at considerable social cost - is lucidly summarised by Mahbubani (1994: 7):

> In working so hard to increase their scope of individual freedom within their society, Americans have progressively cut down the thick web of human relations and obligations that have produced social harmony in traditional societies. Effectively in tearing down such social constraints, upon individuals, American society has carried out slash and burn tactics that have, as in natural forests, left sections of their society denuded of social obligations.

Here we again clearly see the assumption of a natural proclivity for evil on the part of individuals and the moral superiority of community.

Asian leaders have advanced a variety of reasons to explain why they believe liberal democracy is unsuitable in the Asian context, but disputation over human rights has generated a conception that Asian systems should be judged not on human rights but in terms of economic development by 'good government'. For Mahbubani (1992: 9) and Koh (1993: 6), the common characteristics of East Asian regimes define good government: political stability; wise leadership; sound bureaucracies based on meritocracy; economic growth with equity, but rewarding enterprise and achievement; fiscal prudence; social policies in such fields as housing, education and health care that make every citizen feel a stake holder; national teamwork and partnership between government, business and labour; acceptance of the rule of law and an independent judiciary; and relative lack of corruption. According to Mahbubani (1994: 17), 'to have good government, you often need less, not more, democracy'. Koh (1993: 6), however, sees a role for government in developing civil society.

The attempt to portray the concept of human rights as 'alien' may reflect concern about internal pressures in that direction no less than the international - or at least a concern that the latter may fuel the former. Whilst human rights non-government organisations (NGOs) are still in their infancy or non-existent in China, Vietnam, Laos, North Korea, Burma and Singapore, there is a developing Southeast Asian Human Rights Network, which met in Bangkok in July 1994. Furthermore, of the 1,800 NGOs which sent representatives to the United Nations Word Conference on Human Rights in Vienna in 1993, some 250 were from the Asia-Pacific region (*FEER* 8 July 1993: 15). Australian Prime Minister Keating's reference in July 1994 to Indonesia as a nation of 'great tolerance' came in for criticism from human rights activists in Indonesia and the region. During a later visit to Australia, Indonesian human rights lawyer, Buyung Nasution, underlined his disappointment at this remark:

> If you were in our position, people who were oppressed, harassed, some of us were arrested unlawfully, even tortured... of course we could not expect too much - that foreign countries will jump in and help us or get us relief but that at least we would expect that foreign governments would not praise oppressive measures (quoted in *The Australian* 13 September 1994: 6).

Recent attempts to link labour conditions to human rights and to tie trade concessions to progress on human rights has also elicited illuminating responses in Asia and the West. A US government sub-committee suggested linking privileges under the generalised scheme of preferences to improvements in these areas (*ST* 11 May 1993: 12), a position US Trade Representative Mickey Kantor threatened the Indonesian Government with. Asian leaders dubbed the push a blatant attempt at disguised protectionism (*STWE* 23 April 1994: 4).

Malaysia's Mahathir contended that the West was hell-bent on sabotage and would prefer Asia to experience the chaos: 'This is what the West wants - not democracy, not free trade and not human rights' (quoted in *FEER* 17 June 1993: 20). He added: 'Actually, they want us to practice the democracy which brings about instability, economic decline and poverty. With such a situation they can threaten and control us' (quoted in *STWE* 4 Sept. 1993: 10).

However, the threatened withdrawal by the United States government of Most Favoured Nation (MFN) status for China gave expression to significant US-based interests associated with China's regime. The Clinton administration was subject to intense lobbying on behalf of US companies to sever the link between trade and human rights, both to safeguard access to both the huge market and access to cheap labour. As the *Far Eastern Economic Review* (2 June 1994: 25) reported, opponents

> argued that revocation of China's MFN status would mean the loss of American jobs; that trade would enhance social and political evolution in China, thus improving human rights; and that good US-China relations were essential for the security of the Asia-Pacific region.

These views seems to have prevailed, demonstrating that the liberal human rights push in the West has to confront powerful domestic interests who either rationalise or endorse the conditions and practices that are the subject of controversy.

Implications

The point of this paper has been to suggest a rather straightforward yet generally neglected point. That point is that the rhetoric about 'Asian values' and a potential for a clash of cultures, especially between the 'West' and 'Asia', masks a convergence of political ideology across nations. Although I chose to concentrate on the conservative elements of this rhetoric, I have not sought to depict the Asian leaders involved as conservatives per se. Their political and ideological positions are more complex than this. It would be possible to isolate other ideological elements in their broader political rhetoric, such as economic individualism and developmentalism, which also find sympathetic audiences in the 'West'. Even so, it is significant that the discussion of 'Asian values' has predominantly centred around conservative values, and that these are depicted as culturally-generated.

Whatever the demonstrable weaknesses of the arguments, the notion that there is such a thing as 'Asian values', and that these values are culturally-defined and generated, has a strong appeal in Australia and elsewhere - and not just amongst conservatives. In Australia this

perspective has largely been accepted as unproblematic by a host of policy makers, journalists, educationalists, public commentators and business people. This not only reflects the fact that various political and social ideologies have some points of intersection, it also reflects changes within Australia, in particular, that render conservative and anti-liberal rhetoric by Asian leaders useful for domestic political projects. The changing global political economy, involving a new status and importance for Asian economies and societies appreciates the currency of this rhetoric; after all, such economic development is seen to demonstrate that 'Asian values' actually 'work'. This process might be understood as the 'internationalisation' of political and ideological contestations. The Australian experience is thus indicative of a broader, even if embryonic, development.

Not surprisingly, then, conservatives hoping to overturn social reforms of previous decades and neo-liberals intent on an agenda that would bolster economic individualism will select those elements of the 'Asian values' rhetoric that suit their particular cause. Whilst the former may admire the attempt to retain patriarchal family structures, deference to authority and harsh penalties for crime, the latter sees merit in emulating the relatively unencumbered business environment in its call for greater 'labour market flexibility'.

Whilst it is easy to see that the cultural relativist positions of these self-proclaimed Asian leaders will have a particular appeal to those conservatives who believe that society is ultimately held together by traditional values, it is ironic that they also have an appeal for some liberals and radicals who believe their cases against ethnocentrism, racism or Western imperialism are bolstered by such rhetoric (see Robison 1993: 9). Non-governmental development organisations have been particularly prone to feel that there is some truth in the 'Asian values' argument, even if they are uncomfortable with the politics of some of those who espouse them. Part of the reason for this is that some of the development groups they support in Asia adopt culturist perspectives themselves (see Hewison 1993).

Independent of the increasingly conservative rhetoric by some Asian leaders, the influence of economic rationalism in policy circles over the last decade in Australia, and indeed, to differing extents, many other liberal democratic societies, has led to the institutionalisation of instrumentalist and functionalise values in the public sector (Pusey 1991). A not unrelated trend towards managerialist structures has accompanied this development (Hughes 1994). This is especially evident in education, where the usefulness of activities in this enterprise are assessed by ever-narrowing criteria relating to the interests of business and government. Technocratic problem-solving seems to have been successfully projected as the chief business of public policy. Such a direction opens up the possibility of stronger ideological convergences

between bureaucratic elites, across 'East' and 'West' than has hitherto been the case.

The implication is that, far from there being some imminent 'clash of cultures', we have unfolding preconditions for stronger political and ideological convergences across 'East' and 'West'. The facade of 'Asian values' conceals this crucially important development, effectively defining out of existence all opposition to the content of these values within Asia as 'Western' and/or 'alien'. For pragmatically-minded governments and business people, desperately seeking to make a success of greater economic involvement with the region, the notion that 'Asians' are different provides a seductive rationale for double standards on human rights, freedom of expression and other universally-meaningful issues. The most worrying scenario is that far from the internationalisation of political and ideological contestation offering new hope for the oppressed in Asia, it will simultaneously dash these hopes and serve as a new offensive against liberal and social democratic ideas in the so-called West.

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